

CHOSEN FOR GLORY:
AQUINAS ON VOCATION TO THE SUPERNATURAL

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Thomas Aquinas' rich notion of the supernatural is tied to his theory of vocation. Philosophical reasoning about the Providence whereby intellectual beings are called to beatitude reveals two facts. First, the freedom and possibility of human response flows from the gratuity of the divine invitation to glory. Second, the vocation to the supernatural signals a radical reorientation of human nature and its capacity for goodness, such that a secular life in full rejection of this call is nothing short of a kind of living death.¹ The secular vision of humanity diminishes the scope of vocation by characterizing human persons as private, autonomous centers of choice who seek piecemeal temporal fulfillment while experiencing neither the conscious deprivation of sin nor the specificity of a supernatural call.

The title of this essay points to the union of approaches Aquinas takes with respect to our knowledge of God. "*Chosen for glory*" suggests the way of God's *descent* to us through revelation, especially in the Incarnation. "*Vocation to the supernatural*" signals the way of *ascent* from creatures to God. St. Thomas' statement that these two ways are in fact "the same"² can be explained by reference to the order of finality. In the natural desire for perfection, the principle from which the thing originates is also its end. The outpouring of divine love that summons man to eternal life is the same Trinitarian life that is his glory. Thomas Hibbs formulates the key principle: "descent precedes ascent and

¹ If humans possessed only a natural (not a supernatural) end, they would be less noble than all creatures, since they would fail to return to their source, through their unique route of rationality, and their natural desire would not come to rest (SCG III.25). Unlike beasts, we reach a more noble end with assistance, which is more perfect than achieving a less noble end on one's own (ST I-II 5.5 ad 2).

² SCG IV, 1.

transcendence is not an escape but rather a return (*reditus*).³ The vocation to the supernatural can be fulfilled because a personal relation to, and participation in, the transcendent is already inscribed in the invitation to eternal life. The divine liberality expressed in the twofold gift of creation and redemption, we will see, already points to the glory of participation in the interior life of God, even as the Passion of Christ contains the seeds of *His* glory, as the manifestation of God's inner life of supreme love as Self-gift. Thus, the notions of "vocation," "divine liberality" and "glory" are interdependent ideas for St. Thomas. The soul's natural capacity for grace⁴ in the actual order of Providence is made possible through the Incarnation, the "splendor of the Father's glory,"⁵ a glory whose original seal is stamped upon its model, conforming us to Himself.⁶

In this paper we will study the affinities present in the notions of vocation, glory and the supernatural, by looking at three aspects of "vocation" in his thought: first, the treatment of the Biblical theme of "call"; second, the levels of call to the spiritual life; and third, the metaphysical foundations for man's general call to the supernatural. We shall begin with an introductory look at Aquinas on the concept of the supernatural.

1. On the Concept of the "Supernatural" in Aquinas

If "nature" signified that which is possessed by *birth*,⁷ or that which exists in virtue of a thing's essential principles, then the "supernatural" is that which originates *outside* a thing's essence, signifying a divine operation that surpasses the operation of nature, namely, creation and

³ Thomas Hibbs, "Transcending Humanity in Aquinas," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (1992), Suppl.: 198.

⁴ An idea inherited from Augustine: *ST I-II*, 113.10, with reference to *De Trinitate* XIV, 8, 11.

⁵ Hebrews 1.3. See his treatment of this in *In ad Rom.* VIII, l. 6 #703-06.

⁶ *De pot.* 10.4: "We read in Sacred Scripture that 'we are configured to the Son by the mediation of the Holy Spirit'...Now, nothing is conformed to a model except by means of its own seal...Consequently, we say of Christ: 'He has stamped us with his seal...he has given us in pawn the Holy Spirit present in our hearts.'"

⁷ E.g., *ST III*, 2.12.

miracle.⁸ For Aquinas, the supernatural has both an ontological and a moral sense—theology is said to deal with “supernatural substances,” namely, God, angels and the human soul, all of which transcend nature, but also concerns those means proportioning man to his ultimate end, lying beyond his natural operations. Thus, the “supernatural” includes several divisions,⁹ starting with the division between the supernatural *entity* that is God, and His supernatural *effects* begun at creation. Within creation, there is another distinction, namely, of that which is *essentially* supernatural, such as the sanctifying grace necessary for salvation, and that which is only *modally* supernatural; namely, the preternatural gifts (not equivalent to the “sevenfold gifts” of the spirit, but rather Paul’s charismatic list) and miracles, neither of which are strictly necessary for salvation. In his review of the issue, Père Garrigou-Lagrange summarizes these divisions, adding that an abyss exists between the two basic forms of the supernatural:

The *intrinsically* supernatural (*supernaturale quoad substantiam*), characteristic of the intimate life of God, of which sanctifying grace, or “the grace of the virtues and the gifts,” is a participation, and the *extrinsically* supernatural or preternatural (*supernaturale quoad modum tantum*) which is the character of the signs or extraordinary phenomena that the devil can imitate.¹⁰

Within the domain of the intrinsically or *essentially* supernatural, we can note the element of passivity on the side of the human person in that the virtues and especially the gifts of the Spirit involve passivity and docility¹¹ in contrast to the modern stress on extraordinary paranormal spiritual feats. Prophecy is not prayer, as one patristic noted. Turning to the first and central instance of the supernatural,

⁸ See: Johann Auer, “Inwieweit ist im 13. Jahrhundert der Wandel des Begriffes ‘supernaturalis’ bedingt durch den Wandel des Naturbegriffes?” in Auer, *La Filosofia della natura* (Milan, 1966), 331-49.

⁹ A good illustration of these divisions is found in Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation According to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross*, tr. Sr. M. Timothea Doyle (London: Herder, 1937), 347.

¹⁰ Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection*, 19.

¹¹ *ST* I-II, 68. The mystical state is identified with the passive way, says Père Garrigou-Lagrange (*Christian Perfection*, 346 #1).

namely, *Divine Being*, we can discern three notes in the concept: As a supernatural agent, God's causality is *extrinsic* to the creature and *gratuitous*¹² (meaning unmerited and not contained in the creature's essential principles, but rather supplied as a gift elevating man to attain an end beyond his nature) as well as *immediate* or *unassisted*.¹³ The *extrinsically* or *modally* supernatural phenomena, which involve ordinary miracles, gratuitous graces or charismatic gifts such as prophecy, carry only one of these notes, namely, that of *extrinsic efficient causation*, thus falling short of a first order supernatural event.

2. The Biblical Theme of "Call"

The notion of 'call' draws together related themes such as predestination, glory, mission, the good shepherd, charity, and the relation of humility to truth. The Old Covenant's emphasis on Israel's being set apart for an instrumental role in salvation history is replaced by the New Covenant's stress on the call to adoptive sonship, such that by living in faith, hope and charity, the Christian believer partakes in the divine nature and is called into eternal glory. While focusing on the New Testament understanding of the term, Aquinas also drew from the Jewish understanding of vocation in its 'active' sense, which united the divine invitation with the "naming" activity of God and the new 'being' resulting from it. In his treatment of vocation, Aquinas spares no effort to elaborate on the nature of the divine initiative which establishes a new way of existing in Christ. We will limit our discussion of his views to a few examples: the 'apostolic call' and the 'good shepherd' texts; the parables of the 'banquet' and the 'workers in the vineyard,' and finally, the text in Romans 8, which links vocation to predestination and justification.

In his Gospel commentaries, Aquinas presents the *call of the fishermen* as an invitation to the spiritual life through detachment from temporal goods. In the commentary on Matthew, the apostles are called to an

¹² ST I, 62.2.

¹³ We attain our supernatural end only through a supernatural agent (God), whose action is gratuitous (ST I, 62.2), who infuses a perfection or principle of operation (*lumen gloriae*) that surpasses our natural powers in order to attain the end that exceeds the proportion of any created nature. (Cf. *De virt. in communi*, q. un., a. 10.)

imitation of Christ through the perfection of charity more than through mere renunciation, for the latter is a mere means, a prerequisite, to following Him,¹⁴ and the same is said of Jesus' conversation with the rich young man. In his commentary on John,¹⁵ Aquinas glosses the initial conversation between Jesus and his disciples. The Lord's first words to those following after him on the road were, "What are you looking for?" which Thomas takes to imply the possibility of either temporal or spiritual goods. Alluding to Exodus 33.23, they are said to follow after Him because in this life we only see God's back, that is, His effects, and not His face. To their reply, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Aquinas applies first the *mystical* and then the *moral* sense. According to the former, Christ is peace, and we will find perfect peace in the fullness of the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit and in glory. Applying the *moral* sense, the disciples are asking the qualities of those who dwell with Him. Jesus' reply, "*come and see*," is given great weight—Jesus is saying that glory and grace cannot be known except by experience—"Veni," come, by believing and acting; "*videte*," see, by experiencing and knowing. Further, there are *four modes* of coming to this knowledge—through good action, through attaining a 'quiet mind,'¹⁶ through supernatural wisdom or a 'taste of the divine sweetness,' and through prayerful devotion.

The theme of vocation is continued in lectio 16, where the call of Philip and Nathaniel provides the opportunity for detailing the modes of responding, or converting, to Christ. This takes place, he says, either through an exterior source, namely, miracles, or through interior inspiration, where the latter is more likely to have a divine source. As he says elsewhere,¹⁷ the exterior source could also be preaching, direction or reading, working in tandem with the interior light of

¹⁴ *In Matt. IV, 22, l.2, #373.*

¹⁵ *In Joann. I, l.15.* The Johannine commentary is a *reportatio* (a summary of his lectures taken by his Dominican brother Reginald of Piperno, between 1270 and 1272).

¹⁶ "*per mentis quietum, seu vacationem*" (Ps. 45.11).

¹⁷ E.g., *In Sent. I, 41.1.2, ad 3; In Sent. IV, 17.1.1.2.*

grace, a movement towards the good¹⁸ to effect a general call to the spiritual life.

In his commentary on the “*good shepherd*” text in John, chapter 10, Aquinas clarifies the conditions of response to the divine invitation. Versus Chrysostom, who identified Scripture as the door, Thomas adopts Augustine’s interpretation of Christ as the door of the sheepfold, for a door both protects and “leads in” the sheep. The Christological emphasis recurs here, where Christ is at once the shepherd, the door and the way through the door to salvation. As a participated light of the truth which is Christ, we are called to imitate His self-gift and humility. The divine initiative gives a context to vocation, for the good shepherd both opens the door, leads them from evil and teaches them by example, thus “opening a path before them.” Christ is the gate to God’s interiority, Thomas says, in which intimacy the sheep are protected and defended in their going in and going out—the invitation to freedom in Christ thus gives joy even amidst persecution and results in both good conscience and good exterior actions through the virtues. If one puts this text beside others in the *Summa* and the commentary on the Apostles’ Creed, we can conclude that, despite the supernatural origin of vocation, its path of response is through the Passion of Christ, the model of which we are the imperfect image. As Aquinas says in the Biblical commentary, the sheep know His voice but only through a veil, for their participation in the divine life is only by similitude or participation.

The parable of the *banquet*¹⁹ reveals Aquinas’ continued emphasis on the quality of *humility* necessary for responding to the divine call to the spiritual life, and the greatness of God’s mercy in extending the universal call. Through his authorities, Aquinas juxtaposes human pride in the traditional “symbolism of the excuses,” whether it be in the form of bodily goods (one’s farm), or the yoke of the five senses or even the Law (the oxen), with the magnitude of divine mercy and condescension to those excluded from the world, who dine, as Clement says, on the eternal word of God in the “rational feast of charity.”

¹⁸ See Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection*, 337-38.

¹⁹ *Cat. Aurea In XXII Matt; Cat. Aurea In XIV Luc.*

Often we are compelled to enter the banquet through bad fortune and scourges, as lost sheep are pulled homeward.

In his commentary on the parable of the *workers in the vineyard* in Matthew,²⁰ Aquinas interprets the various hours of the day as either various times in salvation history, or as the stages of man's life on earth. God invites all to faith from the moment of birth, and his family is the whole world, with special emphasis on the rational creature. In terms of the ages of salvation history, the first hour represents the time from Adam to Noah, or the "childhood" of man. Here, the invitation is through apparitions and messengers, it is extended to all and received without a great deal of initiative by obeying the Law. The third hour corresponds to the age from Noah to Abraham, or the "adolescence" of man. Here, the invitation is through angels, and emerges through the light of intellect, thus entailing more personal responsibility for response, although it is clouded by the passions. The sixth hour signifies the time from Abraham to David, which corresponds to the Jews and to the "young adulthood" of faith. The conditions of this invitation are grouped together with that of the ninth hour, signifying the time from David to Christ, the fullness of time represented by "old age." God's mercy condescends to the sinner, as in the last hour, where the owner finds workers standing idle. These last represent the Gentiles, who, like the unconverted elderly, replace the true God with worship of idols, thinking they still have time to repent. The final ones represent those nourished with the sacraments, to whom the greatest grace is given, just as the ones closest to death attain their reward more quickly.

Divine liberality is shown by the extent of divine mercy, which, like vocation,²¹ requires distance between the giver (of grace) and the receiver (in a state of sin). In this sense, "vocation" is Christ working within us and a call to remission from sin, where the distance caused by pride is left behind. "Being called" refers to God's help moving and exciting our mind to give up sin, and this motion of God is not the

²⁰ *In Matt*, XX, 1.1.

²¹ Cf. *In Sent.* IV, 17.1.1, qc. 2, arg. 3.

remission of sins, but its cause."²² To the objection that all should obtain equal glory, he replies by distinguishing beatitude from the side of the object and the subject. Objectively speaking, there is only one silver coin, or one river of life, beatitude; but from the side of the subject, there are different sizes of vessels, and thus degrees of participation in beatitude, because some hearts are more filled with (opened by) charity.²³ One could apply the distinction between the remote or general call to the spiritual life and the proximate, individual call, to this parable, as expressed in the mystery of predestination.²⁴ In his commentary on Matthew, Aquinas balances Gregory's emphasis on the great depths of divine mercy initiating the call, with the divine distinction of pride from charity and humility.

In his commentary on Romans, Aquinas links the notion of call, justification and predestination to glory. Paul speaks of God predestining those He foreknew to be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8.28). He continues, "and those whom He predestined He also called; and those whom He called He also justified; and those whom He justified He also glorified" (Rom. 8.30). Christians are reconciled and united with Christ, then, with an eye to the glory of eternal life, in that the divine invitation already involves the "planned sending of a rational creature to the end of eternal life."²⁵ The assurance of the end is already inscribed in the call of grace, since the vocation to glory flows from the order of providence directing things to their ends.²⁶ The omnipresence of divine causality implied in this text, however, does not deny the presence of intermediary secondary causes and creatures' own operations in response to the divine call.²⁷

The Biblical theme of "call" presents Aquinas with a variety of opportunities to express the dominant idea that God in His grace calls

²² ST I-II, 113.1, ad 3; cf. *Quodl.* II, 4.1, ad 1, on the interior movement of Christ in the soul.

²³ "*sic qui animam habet caritate magis dilatam, magis accipiet...*"; cf., *Super Heb.* IV, l.2, on the interior stimulus of love by which we recognize the call.

²⁴ See Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection*, 340.

²⁵ ST I, 23.1.

²⁶ ST I, 22.3ff.

²⁷ ST I, 105.5.

men to forsake a sinful life and to enter Christ's kingdom. Aquinas treats the divine initiative and mercy, as well as the promise of divine union through progress in charity through imitation of Christ. This reveals Aquinas' balance and interplay between primary and secondary causes in his theory of vocation.

3. Levels of Call to the Spiritual Life

Regarding the mode of response to the call to the spiritual life, Aquinas' position is sharply contrasted with the Pelagian *denial* of an interior supernatural principle that would cause assent.²⁸ In order to answer the call to conversion and accept the elevated beatitude that God has prepared as our fulfillment, a supernatural interior principle (grace) is needed. Aquinas also rejects the pagan method of response to the divine, which is either *indifference*, as in the case of Epicureans, who reject prayer and sacrifice in the face of the inflexibility of the divine plan, or *manipulation and control*, which is the Stoics' solution, an attempt to change the divine will by placating it.²⁹ Aquinas emphasizes grace as a divine initiative and the human powers of intellect and will as responsive in structure to this invitation, not as autonomous or alienated capacities but as summoned and empowered to a personal and transforming union. The call to the supernatural is through the divine initiative cooperating with our natural powers, which raises two questions. First, "how is the general and universal call to the supernatural distinct from that call established in baptism, and from the more specific call to a more intense degree of spiritual perfection, exhibited in some persons?" And second, "what are the conditions of response to the call to the supernatural?"

²⁸ Pelagians claimed that assent is caused by human free choice; Aquinas responds that "this is false, for since, by assenting to what belongs to faith, man is raised above his nature, this must needs come to him from some supernatural principle moving him inwardly; and this is God" (ST II-II, 6.1).

²⁹ See *De Ver.* 6.6, on whether predestination can be helped by prayers of the saints: "...the view of the Stoics, who maintained that all things are governed by certain spirits, which they called gods. And when they had decided on something, prayers and sacrifices could win a change in their decision, so they claimed, by placating the gods' minds..." Aquinas also attributes this view to Avicenna in the same article.

To answer the first question, Aquinas distinguishes levels of appetite in relation to ends, ranging from the natural love of the end found in inanimate objects, to the rational form of love proportioned to divine being, in the case of men and angels. "Appetite," the tendency of a thing towards its end, presupposes a proportion and suitability of the end to the subject,³⁰ which itself signals a certain anticipation of the end, its beginning preexisting in the subject.³¹ There is a natural love of inanimate objects towards their ends, as even these have a principle of the inclination towards what is suitable to them.³² On a higher level, sensitive appetite moves towards its end through sense knowledge, and rational appetite, or will, directs itself towards the end, operating in tandem with the lower appetites to achieve it, such that the degrees of appetite attain varying degrees of union through gradations of universality in scope and intensity or power.³³

Things are also directed to the final end according to the diversity of operations.³⁴ First, all things tend towards the preservation of their being, and in this they implicitly desire the likeness with God, and God Himself.³⁵ Second, with respect to sensitive and rational souls, they also strive towards the ultimate end by means of producing their form, or their likeness, in the diffusion of goodness. Thus, in the giving of being to another, things assimilate themselves to divine causality.³⁶

Humans are drawn towards the beatific vision in exactly the same way, Aquinas says, as every creature is moved towards some kind of unity with God—by expressing in their own way their origin from God in their tendency towards Him.³⁷ Rational souls attain a more intense

³⁰ ST I, 63.2. On this topic, see Jan Aertsen, *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas's Way of Thought* (Brill: Leiden, 1988), 342-45.

³¹ *De Ver.* 14.2.

³² *De Ver.* 22.1.

³³ Appetites form an inclusive hierarchy (where the higher includes the lower). See Aertsen, *Nature and Creature*, 344.

³⁴ SCG III, 22.

³⁵ *De Ver.* 22 ad 2.

³⁶ *Comp. Th.* 103.

³⁷ SCG III, 25; cf., John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 26-28.

union through understanding and love.³⁸ Milbank says “as spirits, [angels and humans] are innately called to the beatific vision,” referring to this as our “latent mystical condition.”³⁹ Thus, the supernatural is not a superadded “extra” in the soul, but an ontological dynamism striving for full realization in the life of glory. Our call to glory is paradoxical: the natural desire belongs to all and cannot be frustrated, yet cannot by itself be fulfilled.⁴⁰ So, for Aquinas, the universal call is best answered by the *Christian believer*, who forms a response through being elevated and perfected by the second gift, sanctifying grace. Thus we find embedded in Aquinas’ treatment of the supernatural the problem of reconciling the natural desire for the supernatural and the historical offer of grace in Christ. But the principle expressed above, that the end is in a way present in the subject by its suitability, means that the unbeliever still lives in a state of anticipated grace. We could say that the perfection of the believer’s response to the supernatural, in contrast to the unbeliever’s response, is analogous to the perfection of the spiritual proficient’s response in comparison with that of the ordinary believer. In both cases, the divine invitation initiates the degree of union.⁴¹

³⁸ God bestows on rational creatures a “special love, by which he draws the rational creature above its natural condition to have a part in the divine goodness. And it is by this love that he is said to love someone simply speaking, because by this love God simply speaking wills for the creature that eternal good which is himself” (*ST I-II*, 110.1).

³⁹ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 28.

⁴⁰ See *The Suspended Middle*, 30; cf. Paul Waddell, “Faith and Reason in the Wake of Milbank and Pickstock,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 48 (2008): 381-96.

⁴¹ Here the issue of predestination and the “principle of predilection” are at work (*ST I*, 23.5, ad 3), and, in both, the degree of receptivity to the call is at work. A thing is perfect insofar as it attains to its principle (*ST I*, 12.1). Garrigou-Lagrange puts it succinctly: “A proximate, efficacious vocation to the mystical life is not necessarily an efficacious vocation to the highest degrees of the mystical life or to a high perfection; that depends on predestination in the order of the divine intentions, and on the fidelity of the soul in the order of execution” (*Christian Perfection*, 340).

God is prepared to give grace to all, but unbelievers provide in themselves an obstacle to its reception.⁴² Once in a state of sin, they cannot remove the active impediment to grace without divine help, and yet are responsible, in the way a drunk is still guilty for a homicide he commits,⁴³ or a man covering his eyes while the sun is shining, is still responsible for his actions.⁴⁴ Although humans cannot even form a good act of will apart from grace, they can nonetheless control whether or not they refuse this grace,⁴⁵ in willing not to be open to the possibility of detesting one's sin and desiring divine goodness. In a sense, then, the disbelief of many pagans is like the faith of the devils. Both may know the truth of the propositions of faith through their intellect, but their wills are turned from grace—although the pagan will may not be informed by malice and the sheer desire for power apart from truth (as in the case of the devils⁴⁶), it is nonetheless not necessarily informed by charity or cooperative with its influence. Such is the case of the unbeliever who has heard of God's revelation but has not received the gift of faith. His will is voluntarily turned away from a desire for divine goodness, thus impeding the assent proper to the virtue of faith. And, with respect to the non-hostile pagan, the Christian believer's adherence to the truths of faith signals he has entered another world than the one revealed by the path of human discovery, inaugurating him into future beatitude⁴⁷ through a sure and direct path.⁴⁸

⁴² SCG III, 159.

⁴³ SCG III, 160.

⁴⁴ SCG III, 159.

⁴⁵ He is arguing against the Pelagian view, SCG III, 159: "...one must consider that although a person cannot merit or produce grace by a motion of free will, he can nonetheless impede himself from receiving grace.... And so this is in the power of free will: to impede the reception of the divine grace or not to impede it. For this reason the person who provides an obstacle to the reception of divine grace merits the blame imputed to him... the only people deprived of grace are the ones who provide in themselves an obstacle to grace."

⁴⁶ ST II-II, 5.2, ad 3.

⁴⁷ *Comp. Th.* 2.

⁴⁸ ST II-II, 2.4. Thus, the necessity for Biblical revelation.

What about the relationship between the ordinary believer and the spiritually advanced Christian? In the spiritual proficient and Christian mystic, the mysteries of faith are not only believed but *lived* in a habitual, not transitory manner, exhibited clearly in the superhuman mode of the Spirit's gifts prevailing over their merely human mode, as found in the virtues.⁴⁹ And, with respect to the latter, it is the heroic degree of the virtues, and not the mystical form of prayers that lead up to them, which is an index of holiness for Aquinas. The gratuity of the proximate, individual call to the mystical life, as distinct from the universal, remote call, is affirmed by the metaphysical underpinnings of predestination. Among things ordered to the end, some are nearer to it, namely, those that participate in the divine goodness more fully and require less mediation to reach it than do lower beings.⁵⁰

The degrees of perfection in the universe are mirrored in the personal order, in that sizes of vessels (or different grades of spiritual perfection) mirror the abundance of divine goodness⁵¹ and are dependent on its will. The full flowering of the mystical life in many can be explained by the dictum that "what is received is received according to the mode of the receiver," such that lack of detachment, courage or perseverance slow the journey and impede its fulfillment. This brief survey of the various degrees of call to the life of holiness reveals Aquinas' ability to balance the infallible workings of the divine will with human autonomy in the attainment of the end.⁵²

We can now turn to the second question: namely, "what are the conditions of response to the call to the supernatural?" It requires a combination of *reason* and *humility*. As an application of *synderesis* and conscience through free will, our response to the vocation to the supernatural must be a rational deduction of conclusions from the

⁴⁹ ST I-II, 68.1-2.

⁵⁰ *Comp. Th.* 148: "...everything is ordered to the divine goodness as to its end, and since of those things that are ordered to this end some are nearer to the end, namely, those that participate in the divine goodness more fully, it follows that those things that are lower in creation... are somehow ordered to the higher beings as to their ends..."

⁵¹ ST I, 23.5, ad 3.

⁵² *De malo* 6.1, ad 3, for example.

principles of natural law, according to Aquinas. *Synderesis* is the natural habit of the human soul through which it knows principles of action, which are the universal principles of natural law.⁵³ The central meaning of *conscience* is the application of habit or knowledge to a particular act, by which one judges the rightness or wrongness of an act to be done.⁵⁴ Thus, starting with the principles grasped by *synderesis*, we add judgments about particular actions; the drawing of the conclusions is called “conscience” (*conscientia*⁵⁵), a knowledge directive of action, as prodding, urging or binding.⁵⁶

Since our choices are about means to an end, the wisdom called *prudence* (“right reason about things to be done”⁵⁷) determines both the rightness of an act and its performance, adapting the person to his true end through the correct means.⁵⁸ Just as *prudence* directs the lower moral virtues, so *charity* completes and directs *prudence*, by setting the mean of *prudence* in the context of union with God, such that all actions strive towards complete union under the command of *charity*.⁵⁹ The vocation to the supernatural is the current saturating the particular forms of vocation, and the grasp of neither one requires private revelation or intuition. In a text on prophecy,⁶⁰ Aquinas describes a divinely imprinted intellectual light by which the mind discerns truthfully and efficaciously what is to be done—a sort of prophetic revelation for action. But in the determination of one’s specific vocation the mind is not a mere instrumental agent elevated in

⁵³ *De Ver.*; 16.1, *ST I*, 79.12; *I-II*, 94.1.

⁵⁴ *De Ver.* 17.1; *ST I*, 79.13.

⁵⁵ For example, by *synderesis* one recognizes that murdering one’s father is bad; one then recognizes that a particular action is a case of such a murder; and finally, by *conscience*, one concludes that this action is bad. See *ST I-II*, 76.1.

⁵⁶ *De Ver.* 17.1.

⁵⁷ *ST I-II*, 57.4; cf. *ST II-II*, 47.1.

⁵⁸ *ST I-II*, 57.5. Here, Aquinas explains the way in which rightness of choice involves two factors, namely, a due end and something suitably ordained to that due end.

⁵⁹ *ST II-II*, 27.6, ad 3, on reason and charity as two measures of acts.

⁶⁰ *ST II-II*, 173.2.

a transient way by the principal agent,⁶¹ but rather it is an agent moving out of its own powers, abiding in the principles of its nature and applying them consciously to a set of concrete life circumstances, while subject to love without measure.

In addition to reason, *humility* is a necessary condition of response to our vocation to the supernatural, for Aquinas. It is the dependence upon God signified by humility that makes both the reception of vocation and its response possible. Moral failure, on the other hand, has its root in pride, the self-aggrandizement that rejects subordination and bears a sense of inordinate entitlement to great things.⁶² Pairing humility with magnanimity and opposing both to pride, Aquinas writes, “a twofold virtue is necessary with regard to the difficult good: one, to temper and restrain the mind, lest it tend to high things immoderately, and this belongs to the virtue of humility; and another to strengthen the mind against despair, and urge it on to the pursuit of great things according to right reason; and this is magnanimity.”⁶³ Thus, humility and magnanimity balance each other in the pursuit of virtuous action, both operating according to right reason and avoiding the extremes of presumption and despair. Although some have argued that Aquinas sets up an impossible alliance here between Aristotelian magnanimity and the dependence of humility,⁶⁴ the pairing of these virtues seems particularly fitting in light of popular ideas of vocation today, providing a corrective to both fundamentalist *certitudes* about the particularities of the divine call and damnation (a type of presumptuous entitlement) and the sense of *despair* among the faithful in the face of spiritual adversity and the dominant culture, even within the Church. Magnanimity is not opposed to humility but tempers the

⁶¹ Cf. *ST II-II*, 173.4.

⁶² *ST II-II*, 162.1.

⁶³ *ST II-II*, 161.1.

⁶⁴ See Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 1998) and Eileen Sweeney, “Vice and Sin (I-IIae, qq. 71-89)” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 167 #37.

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awareness of dependence with the noble attempt to perfect our natural and acquired abilities.⁶⁵

4. Metaphysical Foundations of Aquinas' Notion of Vocation

Among the various metaphysical ideas at work in the broad notion of vocation, we will treat four: the dimension of *activity and passivity* (or *receptivity*); *love* as both source and response to the divine call; *likeness* as conformity to Christ as the final cause of vocation; and the *totality of self* required by the first commandment, definitive of vocation as self-gift. The previous section on the degrees of call to the spiritual life already detailed the nature and role of love, while the section on humility touched on the interplay of action and passivity.

The balance between *action and passion* (or *reception*) in the response to divine invitation finds expression in the Biblical commentaries. In the Gospel of John's analogy of the good shepherd, the imitation of Jesus involves passing through the door of humility and Christ's passion towards eternal life, entailing a love of God even in the poverty of His Incarnation.⁶⁶ Love combines with humility here in the requirement of forgetfulness of self to follow the good shepherd, who Himself enters through the door and opens it before us through humility. But reception extends to the arena of *action*, for believers must follow the example of one who teaches through deeds, not mere words. In his commentary on John, Aquinas invests the analogy of the "door," which is fundamentally Christ Himself, with a dynamic of activity and passivity. Christ, as the door, is the gate to the interiority of God, and a "gate" is "that through which things must pass, in order to go within, and find peace."⁶⁷ Passivity also operates in the supernatural gifts, which perfect the theological virtues through increasing docility to the Spirit.⁶⁸ While *active* purification is self-

⁶⁵ See *ST II-II*, 129.3, ad 4: "magnanimity makes a man 'esteem himself worthy of great rewards' in view of the gifts he possesses from God.... Humility, on the other hand, makes a human esteem himself low in view of his own natural defects.... Thus magnanimity and humility are not contrary to each other."

⁶⁶ *In Joann. X*, 1.1.

⁶⁷ *In Joann. X*, 1.2.

⁶⁸ *ST I-II*, 68.

initiated, the nobility of *passive* purification lies in its origin not in the self but in God, as seen especially in the gift of understanding.⁶⁹ This sense of passivity is not opposed to human action, but is a radical receptivity to God in the awareness of the need for grace on the part of the human person. Further, it is not a question of pure passivity or receptivity to divine grace, since infused charity works with already activated moral virtues.⁷⁰ As one author expressed it:

If through the effect of charity people become friends of God, two things must happen: (1) God acts in them and (2) they make themselves available to the affairs of God in the world by means of their natural capacities.⁷¹

On the philosophical level, Aquinas provides the ground for understanding the theological dimension of receptivity. As an intrinsic principle of motion, "nature" has a twofold origin: an active and a passive principle. Thus, a thing is determined by its own activity as well as through the influence of a higher nature (*natura superior*).⁷² Things are assimilated to God both from within and through a higher influence, and the twin dimensions present in nature, action and passion, are at work in the inclination to ultimate ends. By nature taken as a *passive* principle, man naturally inclines to the vision of God. By nature taken as an *active* principle, he cannot 'naturally' attain this end, for natural powers have no proportion to it. Thus, man's nature requires a higher nature for fulfillment of his natural receptivity toward it.⁷³

This leads us to the role of *love as both source and response* in Aquinas' theory of vocation. Divine love is the *source* of man's free response, in that out of His infinite love God draws all creatures in accord with their

⁶⁹ ST II-II, 8.7. Cf. ST I-II, 69.2, ad 3: "In this life...the [mind's] eye being cleansed by the gift of understanding, we can, so to speak, see God."

⁷⁰ Paul J. Waddell indicates that charity permeates the moral virtues as its "strategies." (See Waddell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* [New York: Paulist, 1992], 90.)

⁷¹ Eberhard Schockenhoff, "The Theological Virtue of Charity (IIa IIae, qq. 23-46)," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, 251.

⁷² ST II-II, 2.3.

⁷³ *De virt. in comm.* 10, ad 2.

own dignity back to Himself as their end: “grace, which directs us to the final vision of God, causes the love of God within us.”⁷⁴ Quoting the first letter of John, he explains that it is only through God’s love for us that we can return love: “His love consists in this: it is not we who have loved God, it is He who loved us first.”⁷⁵

Yet the grace that elevates us to supernatural beings does not destroy but preserves our nature, such that through faith we are partakers of the divine knowledge, and through charity our will partakes of the divine love.⁷⁶ Since spiritual creatures desire to return to God in a spiritual way, they are ordered to their end freely through intellect and will,⁷⁷ but, as Milbank recalls, “there can be no spiritual existence without grace,” such that intellectual creatures without grace would be less than other creatures: that is, radically disordered.⁷⁸

Although proportioned to our nature, the human response to the supernatural call culminates in conformity to the actions of Christ—“Christ’s action was our instruction.”⁷⁹ Striving for a fulfillment of the demands of charity and having nothing in oneself that is contrary to the love of the Father and of Jesus is what permits union or “abiding” with God.⁸⁰ This response occurs not through God’s self-sufficiency or power, but through Christ’s Passion, which shows man the depth of God’s love, thus evoking man’s love in return, which is that in which his salvation consists.⁸¹ Thus, the aspects of *humility, love, receptivity* and *likeness* as conformity dovetail in the theological analysis of vocation. On the side of God, man’s response to his vocation is possible through being ordered to Him as an end; on the side of the rational creature, it is possible inasmuch as he is made a rational creature in the *image* or

⁷⁴ SCG III, 151 [my emphasis].

⁷⁵ 1 John 4.10, as found in *In Joann XV* l.2 #2002-3.

⁷⁶ ST I-II 110.4; I, 62.7 on grace preserving nature. Cf. *In Boeth. De Trin.* II, 3.

⁷⁷ SCG III, 112; cf. ST I, 8.3.

⁷⁸ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 98.

⁷⁹ ST III, 40.1 ad 3: “Christi actio fuit nostra instructio.”

⁸⁰ *In 15 Joann.* l.2 #2002-03.

⁸¹ ST III, 46.3.

likeness of God.⁸² Man is naturally capable of receiving this grace in part due to this original imaging, which culminates in a transformation of self in conformity to Christ. Two types of similitude exist for Aquinas, each being a cause of love in its own degree. The first type obtains between the original and its image when both have the same thing in act, such as two things having whiteness. This first type of similitude is the principle of the love of *friendship*. The *second* type is between something that has in potency that which the other has in act, this type causing the love of *concupiscence*, or a friendship of utility or pleasure.⁸³

The first type of similitude can exist between God and man only with the help of a supernatural elevation of his nature through grace and is fulfilled in eternal life through the *lumen gloriae*, a form which perfects man's intellect, making it commensurate with God's being, although not comprehensive of it.⁸⁴ In this life, it is the increase in charity, not knowledge, which unites us to God.⁸⁵ This gradual perfection of "imaging" is a sign of our status as wayfarers capable of advancing in the way of love⁸⁶ through ever-increasing docility and fervor with respect to the Spirit's promptings.

The fourth and final foundation of vocation is the notion of *self-gift* demanded by the First Commandment.⁸⁷ The love of God above all things and of one's neighbor as oneself are the two main precepts of charity, in which the love of God, self, and neighbor are bound in an inner unity.⁸⁸ Aquinas adopts the Gospel sense of *agape* as the love of God for humans, the responsive love of humans for God and, included in that love, the love among humans. Charity, the infused gift whereby God is loved in Himself as the end of all our actions, is the foundation of

⁸² ST III, 9.2, ad 3.

⁸³ ST I-II, 27.3.

⁸⁴ *De Ver.* 10.11. Comprehensive knowledge of God's essence is not possible, even for the blessed. On this general topic, see John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2000), 501-75.

⁸⁵ ST II-II, 24.4.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Deut. 6.5; cf. ST II-II, 184.3.

⁸⁸ ST II-II, 25-26; 44.

growth for all the virtues and gifts and the gauge of their perfection.⁸⁹ Because it is not subject to limits or measure, he can say that our perfection consists in observance of this commandment,⁹⁰ which for the wayfarer is the removal of obstacles to the primary love of God.

Against the Franciscans, Aquinas says that perfection consists not in renunciation, which is a mere means and is more external, but in charity.⁹¹ The voluntary forfeiting of externals is a means to self-renunciation, however,⁹² in that putting these things aside opens a space to answer the call, “*come, follow me.*”⁹³ In this way, he will be perfect in charity who loves God to the point of renouncing himself⁹⁴ in an analogous manner to God’s own Self-gift in the sending and sacrifice of His own Son, and in Christ’s obedience to the Father.⁹⁵

Vocation as self-gift is possible, then, only for those who possess charity, which presupposes the gifts as uniquely and to a varying degree exercised by individuals.⁹⁶ This self-gift that represents the free creature’s response to the divine invitation is marked by a “love of friendship” shared imperfectly with God and extended outwards to self and others. Although self-love is ontologically prior, in that “being a unity” is prior to “becoming one with another,”⁹⁷ the natural movement of love by which the end is inchoately present in the subject⁹⁸ means that there is one motive for charity. This motive flows out of the love of God in Himself towards those things that this love contains

⁸⁹ ST II-II, 184.1.

⁹⁰ ST II-II, 184.3.

⁹¹ *In Matt IV*, 22 l. 2 #373.

⁹² *In Matt. XIX*, 21 #1593.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *De perfect.* 8.

⁹⁶ ST I-II, 68.5, ad 3.

⁹⁷ Cf. Schockenhoff, “The Theological Virtue of Charity,” 253: “If it is occasionally stated that each one loves oneself more than the other, Thomas intends neither a diminishment of the biblical commandment of love nor any concession to egoism (II-II, 27.4).”

⁹⁸ ST II-II, 180.4.

virtually as its end. However, for Aquinas, love for others is not characterized as a mere means towards the end of loving God. Rather, it is a continuation of the original movement of *caritas*, as a response to the original Self-gift of creation, toward the Creator who calls things into existence from nothingness because He is love.⁹⁹

Moreover, the forms in which the primary love appears extend to the domain of action and contemplation. The contemplative life provides an opportunity for self-gift in that by it man "offers" or "sacrifices" the first and highest of his goods to God, namely his own soul.¹⁰⁰ Joining contemplation to prayer, he says that it is more acceptable to God that "one apply one's own soul and the souls of others to contemplation than to action,"¹⁰¹ where action is understood as an external gift radiating out of the plenitude of a contemplative center.¹⁰²

The principle that binds the contemplative and active forms of vocation is in fact the same principle that binds together the two dimensions of charity in action. In his analysis of the human act, Aquinas states that the specification of human acts follows the formal aspect under which they attain their object. An act that is related to a general object is specifically identical with any act directed to an individual object under the same aspect.¹⁰³ For instance, there is one act of eyesight encompassing both light and the colors of individual objects. As applied to *charity*, there is a unity of love of God and neighbor, since friendship with God encompasses as its concrete object the neighbor, who is called to the same end. Applied to contemplation and action, there is a unity of *friendship with God*, encompassing the objects of knowledge and goodness, for it is charity that unites the diverse acts of the active and contemplative lives and directs them to

⁹⁹ See the development of this notion by Pope John Paul II, "Creation as Fundamental and Original Gift" (General Audience, January 2, 1980) #4, and "Revelation and Discovery of the Nuptial Meaning of the Body" (General Audience, January 9, 1980) #1-2. See also *Familiaris Consortio* #11.

¹⁰⁰ ST II-II, 182.4, ad 1.

¹⁰¹ ST II-II, 182.4, ad 1.

¹⁰² ST II-II, 188.6.

¹⁰³ ST II-II, 25.1.

their proper end by effecting an inner transformation of the acting subject.

5. Conclusion

Having sketched some key aspects of Aquinas' theory of "vocation to the supernatural," we see the interdependence of the terms in their philosophical, theological, and Biblical significations. From our human longing for the beatific vision arises our ongoing transformation by grace, just as God's call of the intellectual creature to accept His loving gift of Himself also provides the means and powers for receiving it. Aquinas' treatment of vocation in his Biblical commentaries focused on the New Testament's notion of filial adoption and the vocation of conformity to Christ, through whom we approach God as imperfect mirrors reflecting the divine original. The texts concerning the "apostolic call," the "good shepherd" and the parables of the *banquet* and the *workers in the vineyard*, open up numerous vistas on the notion of call.

In contrast to both pagan and Pelagian forms of denial of the supernatural, Aquinas admits both the native sphere of the rational creature and the gratuity of its God-like life and destiny. Without making the supernatural a spontaneous emanation out of the natural order, he nonetheless refuses to make grace an extrinsic accident superimposed on a purely natural human beatitude. There is a tension between divine providence and personal freedom reflected in the three levels of participation in the divine life: the unbeliever, the ordinary Christian, and the spiritual proficient.

The metaphysical foundations of Aquinas' notion of vocation draw upon "nature" taken as both an active and as a passive principle for understanding the return to God. Aquinas showed the foundation of similitude or likeness for the "love of friendship" between men and God. The Christological model in Aquinas' theory of self-gift infuses both the realms of action and contemplation.

The richness of Aquinas' teaching on vocation to the supernatural reveals that post-medieval philosophy's concept of the supernatural has developed in a historical and theological vacuum, and in its forgetfulness has failed to give an account of the source and summit of the life of the spirit. Thus, the importance of Aquinas' theory of that

vocation lies less in its fidelity to a long-buried but vital tradition before him, than in its power to effect spiritual renewal by clearing the ground and reinvesting both the supernatural and "vocation" with their full and persuasive credentials.